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Strengthens Families***

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ABSTRACT: A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that a family's religious involvement directly benefits adults, children and youth in many ways. Divorce rates are lower and marital satisfaction and quality scores highest among religiously involved couples. Religious practices are linked with family satisfaction, closer father-child relationships, and closer parent-child relationships. There is less domestic violence among more religious couples and religious parents are less likely to abuse or yell at their children. Religious involvement promotes involved and responsible fathering and is associated with more involved mothering. Greater religiosity in parents and youth is associated with a variety of protective factors for adolescents. Rigorous meta-analyses conducted by scholars in various disciplines and examining populations from several different religious traditions have demonstrated that many of the salutary mental, physical, and marital correlations between religiosity and well-being are quite robust and not attributable merely to selection effects or explained away by socio-demographic factors.

How Family Religious Involvement Benefits Adults, Youth, and Children and Strengthens Families

Spirituality and religion are important to most people in most parts of the world. Research has shown important connections between religion and marriage and family life (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). An international survey study from 15 nations ($n > 19,000$) produced evidence supporting the relatively high religiosity in America, but also concluded that in the more secular nations, parental religiosity is a stronger influence than the national religiosity and that the difference between religious and secular families is significant (Kelley & Graaf, 1997). While certainly it would be beneficial to have extensive international literature on the linkage between religion and families, thus far the great majority of the research in this area comes from the United States. Nonetheless, because America is characterized by religious freedom, religious diversity and by high rates of a variety of societal ills (drugs, divorce, child abuse, suicide, etc.), it presents researchers with a good national case study to test the benefits of religious involvement.

Religion in America

America is a uniquely spiritual and religious nation in many respects. Sixty percent of Americans report that religion is “important” or “very important” to them (McCullough, Hoyt, & Larson, 2000) and only 2% say they do not believe in God (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). American religion is largely a family affair. Ninety-five percent of all married couples and parents in America report a religious affiliation (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), about 90% desire religious training for their children (Gallup & Castelli, 1989), and more than half of married couples say they attend church at least monthly (Heaton & Pratt, 1990).

Although it is likely that many survey respondents give somewhat exaggerated reports of their church attendance, it is still clear that religious beliefs and activities remain an important part of American family life (Christiano, 2000). Indeed, the United States is likely both the most religious and the most religiously diverse industrialized nation in terms of voluntary participation in religious institutions (Eck, 2001; Melton, 2003). Although many Americans are only moderately religious or are “spiritual but not religious,” Miller and Thoresen (2003) report that religion is “the single most important influence in [life]” for “a substantial minority” of Americans (p. 25).

This paper briefly reviews the literature of mainly American-based research focusing on how religious involvement benefits individuals, marriage, family life, parenting, and child and youth well-being. We will show how research supports the idea that few, if any, institutions in American society have a better track record at facilitating strong marriages, positive parental involvement, or child and youth well-being than religion.

Paradigmatic Shifts on the Study of Religion

Stark and Finke (2000) trace the origin of the scientific study of religion to the period of the “Enlightenment” when “social science began with the conviction that religion was not only false but wicked and best gotten rid of as soon as possible” (p. 1). Although these assumptions were embraced in the social sciences for almost three centuries, sound empirical work on religion in the past few decades has produced evidence that disproves the old beliefs and has allowed a new paradigm to emerge. Among other paradigmatic shifts are these: (1) Religiosity—especially devout faith—was seen by many as a sign of psychopathology and harmful to individuals and families but is now known to be correlated with health, mental health, and other benefits; (2) Religious phenomena were formerly attributed solely to material and secular factors alone (psychological, social, & economic) but research has found that

there are also authentic “religious” causes (doctrine and transcendent experiences) of religious phenomena. Despite the clarity of these empirical advancements, Stark and Finke (2000) argue that “even today most social scientists continue to display a substantial bias against those who take their religion very seriously” (p. 14).

Clearly not all forms of religious belief, practice, or community are healthy for marriage, family life, adults and children (Dollahite, et al., 2004; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). There are some religious beliefs that promote abuse, violence, extremism, infidelity, and other seriously harmful practices in family life. However, there is now a large body of scholarly evidence based on hundreds of studies that conclusively demonstrates the benefits of religiosity for various aspects of life. A number of rigorous meta-analyses conducted by scholars in various disciplines (e.g., public health, sociology, psychology) have demonstrated that many of the links between religiosity and mental, physical, and marital, and family well-being are quite robust and not attributable merely to selection effects or explained away by socio-demographic factors (Koenig, 1998; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Mahoney et al., 2001; Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999).

In light of this new paradigmatic shift in how we view religion in the social sciences, the purpose of this paper is not to address the fairly uncommon correlations of religion with negative aspects of family life, but rather to discuss the large body of research that has found correlations between religious belief, practice, and community support and health, mental health and relationships within the family unit.

Religion, Individual Health and Mental Health

In the past two decades a large body of empirical research has correlated various aspects of religious involvement with salutary and protective features of individual development such as physical and mental health (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Koenig et al. 2001; Marks, 2005). A particularly striking finding based on a nationally representative sample of over 21,000 indicated that those who attend religious services more than once a week have an average life span 7.6 years longer than non-attenders (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999). Further, average longevity increases to almost fourteen years among service-attending African Americans versus black non-attenders (Hummer et al., 1999; Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005).

Religiosity has been repeatedly associated with better mental and emotional health including less depression, drug use and abuse, suicide, coping with stress, and negatively associated with a host other risk factors across a variety of samples and methods (Koenig, 1998; Koenig et al., 2001; Pargament, 1997). On the other hand, some research has correlated religiosity with authoritarianism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Black, 1985) and with less open-mindedness and flexibility (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). Indeed, religiosity is a complex topic that becomes even more so as researchers move from the individual to familial level of analysis (for a recent review, see Dollahite et al., 2004).

In the area of *mental health* (Koenig et al., 2001; Koenig, 1998) and *coping* (Pargament, 1997), positive links have been found between higher religiosity and a number of positive outcomes such as greater well-being, hope and optimism, purpose and meaning, and self-esteem; better adaptation to bereavement, greater social support, less loneliness, less depression, fewer suicides, less anxiety, less schizophrenia and other psychoses, less alcohol and drug use; and less delinquency and crime. Although little is known about the direct relationship between childhood religion and mental health (Koenig et al., 2001), it follows that if adult family members experience greater mental health their spouses and children likely will benefit. Research examining adult religiosity affects on childhood physical and mental health confirms this assumption.

Benefits of Religion for Marriage and Family Life

The literature doesn't place as much emphasis on how religion benefits the entire family system as it does on individuals and dyadic family relationships (i.e., marital, parent-child) as evidenced by the fact that the majority of the research studies on the religion and the family have focused on the individual rather than the various relational units of the family (Mahoney et al., 2001). However, as individuals enter into marriage and create their own family, the level of mental and physical health as influenced by their religious activity in turn affects the entire family. According to family systems theory, the state of each person in the family affects each of the others and the family as a whole.

With this in mind and due to the collective and social nature of religious practice, we focus our review of the literature on the benefits of religiosity for various age levels and familial relationships, including marital relationships, mothering, fathering, parent-child, and parent-adolescent. This will include research that focuses on the individual level as well as the relational levels.

Because of the growing diversity in respect to ethnicity, family structure and religious belief and practice, the linkage between religiosity and family life is increasingly complex and there many unexplored areas in need of research (Chatters & Taylor, 2005). For the purposes of this paper, we do not attempt to address all of the literature (or lack thereof) containing diversity in regards to ethnicity, family type and religious belief. However, in attempt to take diversity into account, we have included a number of studies that use samples from ethnic minority groups and international populations, aware that this doesn't paint a complete picture of the diversity that exists in the religion-family linkage.

Religion and Family Life

In terms of religion and family life, the amount of *couple arguments* and *divorce rates* are lower and *marital satisfaction* and *marital quality* scores highest among religiously involved couples of the same faith (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Mahoney et al., 2001). Further, certain religious practices are linked with *family satisfaction* (Lee, Rice, & Gillespie, 1997), *closer father-child relationships* (Wilcox, 2002), and *closer parent-child relationships* (Mahoney et al., 2001; Dollahite et al., 2004). There is *less domestic violence* among more religious couples (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002) and religious parents are *less likely to abuse or yell* at their children (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000; Wilcox, 1998). In addition, greater religiosity in parents and youth is associated with a variety of protective factors for adolescents (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Regnerus, 2003; Wills, Yaeger, & Sandy, 2003). However, not all families reap the same benefits; same-faith married parents seem to benefit most from religious involvement, while divorced, cohabiting and never married mothers do not fare as well (Sorenson, Grindstaff, & Turner, 1995; cf. Dollahite et al., 2004).

Religion and Marital Relationships

In the area of marriage relationships, a positive relationship has been documented between religiosity and *marital commitment* (Mahoney et al., 2001; Larson & Goltz, 1989; Wilson & Musick, 1996), *marital satisfaction and functioning* (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Scott, & Emery, 1999; Mahoney et al., 2001), *marital stability* (Call & Heaton, 1997; Christiano, 2000; Clydesdale, 1997; Mahoney, et al., 2001); *marital conflict resolution* (Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney, et al., 1999); *marital fidelity* (Dollahite & Lambert, unpublished; Wade & DeLamater, 2002); *family-centeredness* (Christian, 2001); and *lower rates of domestic violence* even when controlling for substance abuse, depression, and social support (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Ellison & Anderson, 2001).

In their rigorous meta-analysis of the religion and family literature over the past two decades, Mahoney et al. (2001) found that church attendance serves as a protective factor against divorce. They found that couples who attend church on a regular basis have a divorce rate of 44% compared to 60% divorce rate

for non-attenders. Furthermore, the divorce rate for highly religious couples from more traditional faith communities (e.g., Orthodox Jews, Mormons, and Muslims) is significantly lower. These findings are predictive, not merely correlational, and hold up when various demographic variables are controlled for.

The meta-analysis conducted by Mahoney et al., (2001) showed that this was not simply a function of negative attitudes about divorce being held by more religious people. Their findings suggested that greater personal religiosity was positively related to greater marital satisfaction. And they found that these findings cannot be explained away as simply a function of conventionalization (the idea that more religious people are simply more likely to say they are happily married) or that more religious people are simply more willing to put up with conflicted marriages.

In fact, based on studies linking better communication with religiosity (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney, et al., 1999) the real difference may be that more religious couples employed better communication and conflict resolution skills. Of course, those who attend church regularly are more likely to hold stronger beliefs about God, marriage, family, and children and the lower divorce rate likely stems from these beliefs more than from simply attending church.

Another recent study addressed the growing concern of Internet pornography because of its effects on the marital relationship and family ties, and found that among other factors, church attendance was inversely related to pornography use (Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004). Religiosity has also been found to help women rise above the negative effects of childhood sexual abuse (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993), thus reducing its negative influence in various aspects of their marital relationship.

Mahoney et al., (2001) theorized the following about parent-child and family relationships:

Judeo-Christian institutions disseminate many religiously-based teachings to promote positive parent-child and family interactions . . . these include the importance of acknowledging personal weaknesses and limitations, accepting and forgiving others, making personal sacrifices on behalf of other family members, and viewing the family as a symbolic or literal means through which to experience God's love and grace Various religious rituals (e.g., Baptism) and scriptures also send the message that parents have a sacred duty to reveal God's love to children by their example of love and devotion to the family. In addition, couples are encouraged to view themselves as co-creators of children with God and to work together to raise their children in a nurturing family atmosphere that reflects the Kingdom of God. . . . the substantive content of religion may influence parents' appraisals of their children and thereby facilitate family functioning. Parents may sanctify their children (e.g., view child as a holy gift), parenting (e.g., my parenting reflects God's will), or the co-parent alliance (e.g., my spouse and I have a spiritual obligation raise our children as a team). (p. 586)

Religion and Parenting

A few studies have found that the birth of a child increases the likelihood of church attendance by mothers and some fathers (Becker & Hofmeister, 2001; Palkovitz, 2002). And a large body of research suggests that there are few, if any, institutions in society with a better record of facilitating positive parental involvement than religion. The tendency of religious beliefs to place great value on children increases parental motivation to spend time and energy on their children (Koenig et al., 2001). Not only are religious parents *less likely to abuse or yell* at their children but they are also *more likely to hug and praise* them often (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000; Wilcox, 2002; Wilcox, 1998) and to display *better parent functioning* (Brody et al., 1994; Brody et al., 1996; Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999). Brody et al., (1996) found that among African Americans, greater parental religiosity directly predicted *marital and family cohesion* and *fewer child behavior problems* (both externalizing and internalizing).

In the following sections, we will discuss the research on how religiosity influences mothering and fathering. However, given that in our current society more children are deprived of their fathers than their mothers—due to social and cultural forces that actually discourage father involvement (Blankenhorn, 1995; Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Popenoe, 1996)—and because of the relative lack of research on mothering and religion, we will place greater emphasis on the research that discusses how religion promotes paternal involvement and responsibility.

Religion and mothering. Although the subject of motherhood is a rapidly growing area of research (Arendall, 2001), there is relatively little on this topic, and even less on the linkages between mothering and religion. A few findings seem noteworthy, with the acknowledgement that future research is needed to bolster the reliability and validity of these findings.

The current culture in America sends a message to mothers that along with seeking the well-being of their children, they also need to seek personal gain (Beckwith, 2003). In contrast, many religious beliefs stress the importance of children and family, thus raising the motivation of mothers to continue focusing their time and energy on their children (Koenig et al., 2001). Additionally, research has found that mothers' religiosity is linked to greater parenting skills and less co-parenting conflict (Brody et al., 1994) as well as to increased reports (by mothers and adult children) of having a positive parent-child relationship (Pearce & Axinn, 1998).

Using a nationally representative sample of mothers ($n = 2,009$) Erickson & Aird (2005) found that mothers who reported higher religiosity were much more likely than less-religious mothers to be involved in social groups that focused on improving such areas of family life as reducing all forms of family violence, promoting healthy marriages, helping mothers and fathers improve their parenting skills; and enabling mothers and fathers to spend more time with their children..

Religion and fathering. A now substantial body of research well summarized by David Blankenhorn (1995) and David Popenoe (1996) show that when fathers are present and meaningfully involved, children fare better in almost every way (economically, emotionally, academically, socially, physically, and spiritually). If fathers' presence and meaningful involvement matter greatly to children's well-being, it is crucial to discover what influences are most likely to encourage and support responsible father involvement.

Men tend to be less religious than women. Fathers tend to be less involved with children than women. In the cases of unwed birth and divorce fathers are more likely to be "absent" or only nominally involved in children's lives. Thus religious involvement may tend to have a greater influence on parental involvement for fathers than for mothers.

Greater paternal religiosity directly predicts marital and family cohesion and fewer child behavior problems. Dollahite and colleagues found that religion may promote greater commitment to children and greater father involvement (Dollahite, 2003; Dollahite, 2004; Dollahite, Marks, and Olson, 1998; Marks and Dollahite, 2001; Olson, Dollahite, & White, 2002). In support of this, Jason Latshaw's research (1998) found that for highly religious fathers, faith provided them with a sacred center of meaning and identity that they said made it almost inconceivable that they would be an "uninvolved father" (p. 68).

Wilcox (2002) found that, compared to their unaffiliated counterparts, religiously affiliated fathers are more likely to be engaged with their children in one-on-one conversations, more likely to be involved with youth activities, and more likely to have dinner with their children. Fathers' religiosity has been found to influence adolescents' religiosity, though not much is known about how or why religious beliefs and practices influence fathers' conduct or which religious beliefs and practices are most helpful

and influential (Clark, Worthington, & Danser, 1988; Giesbrecht, 1995).

In a three-generation study of father-child relationships, developmental psychologist John Snarey (1993) found that father-child church attendance provided significant “social-emotional child-rearing support” for fathers (p. 315). Another study examining narrative accounts of fathers found that many fathers expressed feeling a strong connection with their children when they participated together in religious practices or provided their child with spiritual guidance (Brotherson, Dollahite, & Hawkins, 2005)

Sociologist Steve Nock found that religious communities strengthen the father-child bond by encouraging men to be committed to their families and encouraging them to be responsible to their children (Nock, 1998, p. 88). Faith communities have also been found to provide fathers with supportive networks and interactions beyond the family circle (Ellison and George, 1994).

Psychologist and father-involvement advocate Wade Horn argues that faith supports responsible fathering by teaching that marriage is the morally right context to have and raise children (Horn, 2001). In addition, William Doherty and his colleagues (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson, 1998:286) have concluded from empirically-based findings that “the family environment most supportive of fathering is a caring, committed, collaborative marriage.” Research has confirmed the strong positive correlation between religion and marital satisfaction and stability (Call and Heaton, 1997; Lee, Rice, and Gillespie, 1997). Since the divorce rate of highly religious couples is significantly lower than that of the general population, and since marriage strengthens fathering, it follows that religion fosters responsible, involved fathering (Dollahite, 1999).

Based on findings from the review of literature, we think it is fair to say that a man with a serious religious commitment and involvement, on average, is more likely than one with little or no religious involvement to:

- remain sexually chaste before marriage and faithful to his marriage vows and thus not endanger his wife and children with sexually transmitted diseases nor father a child out of wedlock;
- be and remain committed to marriage and children even during times of difficulty and thus not bring the trials and challenges of divorce upon his wife and his children;
- be highly involved in the lives of his children and parent with higher degrees of emotional warmth;
- practice kindness and mercy in his relationship with his children and be less likely to abuse his children;
- remain involved with his children in the face of challenging circumstances such as dissolution of marriage, or disability of a child;
- choose to avoid practices that harm family relationships such as substance abuse, crime, violence, child abuse, pornography, gambling, and idleness.

Indeed, based on the evidence of the research we’ve cited, it may be that religion provides the strongest force available to reverse the powerful trends that are breaking fathers and children apart.

Because of the many societal problems that stem from father neglect and father absence (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996), we think leaders of nations should protect the ability of religious communities to worship freely and for fathers to transmit religious values to their children. This will strengthen families and benefit children (Dollahite, 1999).

Effects of parental religiosity on children and youth. Children of religious parents are impacted by their parents' beliefs in a variety of ways. If religious mothers are less likely than non-religious to consume alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes or to carry sexually transmitted diseases, then their children will be more likely to have a healthy and normal prenatal environment (Koenig et al., 2001). Additionally, parental religiousness has been associated with various child outcomes such as fewer behavior problems, less alcohol and drug use, and less antisocial behavior and depression (Mahoney et al., 2001).

Although very little has been done to examine the linkage between religion and mental health of children and youth (Koenig et al., 2001) there is comparably much more research on the affects of parental religiosity on adolescents. Smith (2003b) found that more religious parents have significantly higher moral expectations for and exercise significantly more supervision over their adolescent children. Thus, not surprisingly, "the more parents attend religious services, the more upset their adolescent children perceives their parents would be if they found out they were having sex, using drugs, drinking alcohol, getting into fights, and skipping school" (p. 418). Adolescents' perceptions of their parents' behavioral expectations may influence their behavior, since various show that parental religiosity is associated with adolescents being less involved in problematic activities, such as alcohol and drug use (Pearce & Haynie, 2004; Foshee & Hollinger, 1996; Hardy & Kirby, 1995), and they attain higher levels of education (Caputo, 2004).

Not only does parental religiosity affect youth behavior, it also impacts their beliefs. Dollahite and Marks (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with highly religious parents and adolescents, and found youth who consider their own spiritual development to be facilitated primarily through their parent's teaching, example, and through parent-child discussions of spiritual/religious issues which were often initiated through children's questions and concerns.

Effects of Adolescent Religiosity on Adolescents

Contrary to popular opinion, a large number of youth in America claim that religion *is* an important influence in their lives. In what is clearly the most extensive sociological research project of adolescent religiosity in America, Smith (2005) in conjunction with the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) gathered and analyzed data from 3,370 adolescents, ages 13-17. Generally speaking, Smith found that close to half (49-51%) of the adolescents in America report that religion is important in shaping their daily lives and their major life decisions and compared to the non-religious youth, their lives were full of examples of the positive affects of their faith. Because the NSYR has provided the most recent, comprehensive and relevant research on the topic of adolescent religiosity, we will draw extensively from Smith's findings, and where other studies had similar findings, we will give reference to them as well.

Findings from the NSYR show that the greatest evidence of religiosity influencing youth's lives for the better can be seen when comparing the lives of the most religious youth, "The Devoted" (8% of American youth), with the lives of the average American youth. 'The Devoted' youth claim that their religion is "very or extremely important in [their] everyday life" and they feel "very or extremely close to God"; they attend religious services, pray, read scripture, and participate in religious youth groups more than other American teens (p. 220). In the area of family relationships, this group of extremely religious youth reported having the highest quality of parent-child relationships in every area that they were asked, including feeling close to and getting along with their mother and father, feeling loved, accepted and understood by their parents, and in the degree of honesty they maintain with their parents.

Adolescent religiosity is inversely related with many high-risk behaviors, all of which have potential to greatly influence the adolescents' current and future family relationship. From the NSYR data, the

religiously devoted youth were significantly less involved with smoking and drinking, pre-marital sexual activity, and viewing X-rated and pornographic materials (Smith, 2005). On an international level, a prospective study in France found a decrease in smoking, and alcohol and coffee consumption by religious teenage boys at the five-year follow-up (Weill & Bourhis, 1994). Since 1950, adolescent suicide has increased dramatically, and is now a leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds (Wagner, 1997), but data at both the aggregate and individual level show religious involvement to have a negative relationship with adolescent suicide (Koenig et al., 2001).

Studies have also found that adolescent religiosity can lead to many positive outcomes, including school performance. Research on high school students from various ethnic backgrounds (including African-American) has found that religious youth do better in school; they spend more time doing school work, are less likely to cut class, and have a higher graduation rate than their non-religious counterparts (Smith, 2005; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Freeman, 1986). Bankston & Zhou (1996) studied the effects of religiosity among Vietnamese immigrant youth, and found that religious involvement promotes more involvement in an ethnic community, which in turn promotes greater educational pursuits and less involvement in popular culture's risk-behaviors.

Markstrom (1999) found that youth religious involvement led to an increase in hope, will, purpose, fidelity, love, and care. Smith (2003c) developed a conceptual framework indicating how religion exerts a positive influence on youth. He proposed nine factors including:

- (1) moral directives, (2) spiritual experiences, (3) role models, (4) community and leadership skills, (5) coping skills, (6) cultural capital, (7) social capital, (8) network closure, and (9) extra-community links (p. 19)

Religious youth and community.

The benefits for youth stemming from religiosity extend beyond individual and familial realms to the community. Many religious congregations offer ongoing opportunities to engage in social interaction with others of their same faith, resulting in larger social networks, more friendships and support groups (Taylor & Chatters, 1988; Ellison & George, 1994). The NSYR found that the religiously "devoted" youth have more non-familial adult support, more adult supervision, and are more comfortable talking with non-familial adults (Smith, 2005). Smith (2003a) found that when parents and youth mutually participate in communal religious activities, there is a significant increase in "network closure" with others in the community (i.e. friends, teachers, other parents). He hypothesized that the influence of religious adult leaders would reinforce the parental influence.

Based on in-depth interviews with 74 highly religious Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families with children and youth, Dollahite and Marks (2005) found that religiously inspired service to people in the faith community and wider community allowed children and youth to develop greater concern and empathy for others; abstaining from proscribed activities and substances and making sacrifices for religious/spiritual reasons encouraged youth to develop ego strength and a sense of uniqueness through being different from their peers; and a religiously motivated emphasis on honoring their parents facilitated more respectful and less contentious relationships between these youth and their parents. Children and youth indicated that their own spiritual development was facilitated primarily through their parent's teaching, example, and through parent-child discussions of spiritual/religious issues (often initiated through children's questions and concerns).

Elderly Benefiting From Religion

Although elderly often face physical limitations, as a population they are still quite religiously active, with over half of elderly Americans attending weekly religious services and close to 80% reporting to

have attended church within the last month (Princeton Religious Research Center, 1994). Research has found that for elderly Americans, religious involvement plays a role increasing mental and physical health (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999) and the ability to cope with psychological well-being (Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 1995), especially for those who are low in social support (Dulin, 2005). For elderly in nursing homes or retirement communities, various religions bring the religious services to them or provide transportation to and from services (Johnson, 1998). Considering the topic internationally, a study in Taiwan found that elderly who participate in religious activity are less likely to suffer from depression (Hahn, Yang, Yang, Shih, & Lo, 2004).

Conclusion

Since many studies now show the beneficial consequences of religious belief, practice, and community support on health, mental health, and on current and future marital and family relationships, it appears that one of the most important things parents can provide for their children is spiritual and religious experience and community. We believe that although governments should not favor one religion over others, nor compel anyone to practice a religion, they should foster religious freedom and involvement as a way to promote increased personal health and well-being, marital strength and stability, and familial strength and functioning.

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